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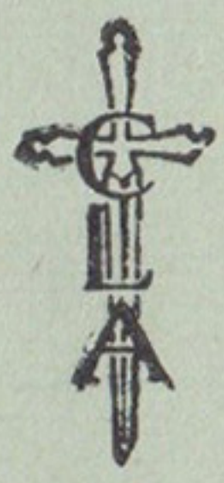
LENT

by

Harold Riley



SEASONS TRACTS

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LENT

The Origin of Lent

IT probably comes as a surprise to the ordinary member of the Church, among whose earliest memories is that of singing

" Forty days and forty nights
Thou wast fasting in the wild,"

to learn for the first time that the fast of Lent was not originally instituted in memory of our Lord's sojourn in the wilderness. Yet he only has to consider that there is no obvious connexion between a commemoration of the fast in the wilderness at the beginning of Christ's Ministry, and preparation for the festival of the Resurrection, which occurred at the end of it, to see that there is a further explanation necessary. In the earliest days of the Church, a short fast of one or two days did prepare for Easter, but it is not from this that the Lenten observance arose.

Easter was anciently the time for the administration of Baptism, and the weeks immediately before it were set aside for the instruction of those to be baptized. Already in the second century, candidates for Baptism also prepared for it by fasting, and as the period devoted to instruction became lengthened, so the fast became lengthened also. In the fourth century the custom arose of the faithful who were already baptized joining with the candidates for Baptism in the observance of the fast, and also in attendance at the courses of instruction. When they did so, Lent, in the modern sense, had begun to be observed. Finally, the period of Lent was fixed, in commemoration of our Lord's

own fast, at forty days. With the omission of Sundays, as not being suitable as fast days, we thus arrive at the familiar arrangement of forty week-days of Lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday.

So Lent became a period for spiritual training for the whole Church. Its value has been abundantly proved by experience, and its gradual merging into the commemoration of our Lord's Passion at the end of it has given meaning and purpose to the desire of the Christian to be made one with Christ.

The Fast in the Wilderness

Although in origin Lent was not connected with the memory of our Lord's fasting, it has now a close association with it. Our Lord's solitude in the wilderness is referred to in St. Mark's Gospel (i. 12–13), but no detailed information is there given. St. Matthew and St. Luke give us longer accounts (St. Matt. iv. 1–11; St. Luke iv. 1–13), chiefly dealing with the Temptation. The one detail peculiar to St. Mark, that our Lord was " with the wild beasts ", is probably meant to remind us of Psalm 91, verse 13, as the reference to the Angels' ministry does to verse 11 of the same Psalm.

Our Lord's forty days in the wilderness were a period of " retreat ", the most remarkable of those times when he retired to solitude to be in the presence of his heavenly Father; of such periods he could have said, as he did of his Passion: " And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me ".

The forty days were days of fasting as well as of prayer; when temptations came, the first of them arose naturally out of this fact, so that our Lord was tempted to turn stones into bread. This time was, even apart from this, obviously a time of special trial to our Lord, when he faced issues that affected the whole of his ministry; but St. Luke tells us that when the devil departed from him, it was " for a season ".

Three Evangelical Duties

Lent is traditionally a special time for the exercise of three duties laid upon us in the Gospel: almsgiving, prayer and fasting (St. Matt. vi. 1–18). They are indeed taken for granted by our Lord, who does not so much tell us to perform them, as how we are to perform them. For the devout Christian, it is not enough to perform a series of external actions; his concern is to make his outward acts the expression of an interior love of God and devotion to his service. Fasting (that is doing without food) and abstinence (that is fasting from a particular kind of food, fleshmeat), as well as almsgiving and prayer, must not be a mere obedience to a code, but the expression of, and a means to, the discipline of our lives that we may be like " a polished shaft " in God's quiver (Isa. xlix. 2), ready for God's service.

Ash Wednesday

Space will not allow anything like a full explanation of Lenten services. All we can do here is to point out certain salient features in the devotion of the Church at this time.

Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, derives its name from the *imposition of ashes* on the heads of the faithful on that day. This ceremony, originally concerned with the reconciliation of penitents, has become a penitential exercise for all Christians. After prayers for the blessing of the ashes (themselves from palms from the last Palm Sunday), and the singing of some short anthems, the sign of the Cross is made with the ashes on the heads of the people, while the priest says, " Remember, man, that dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return " (Gen. iii. 19). The *Lesson* (Joel ii. 12–17) of the Mass that follows urges us to fasting, and the *Gospel* (St. Matt. vi. 16–21) to an interior mortification of the heart.

The First Sunday

On the first Sunday in Lent, we think particularly of our Lord in the wilderness. The *Collect* is addressed to our Lord himself, praying him that we may use such abstinence as to learn obedience to him. The *Epistle* (II Cor. vi. 1–10) reminds us that " now is the accepted time " when we have opportunity to work out our salvation; in all things, whether good or evil, and by all the means God gives us, we are to approve ourselves as the ministers (that is, the servants) of God. The account that St. Matthew gives of our Lord's fasting and temptation (St. Matt. iv. 1–11) provides the *Gospel.* In replying to the devil's temptations, our Lord quotes the ninety-first Psalm (" He shall give his Angels charge concerning thee "), and this Psalm provides all the chants for the Mass on this day (*Introit*, *Gradual*, *Offertory-sentence*, and *Communion-verse*).

The Second Sunday

On the second Sunday, the *Epistle* (I Thess. iv. 1–8) again urges us to sanctification of life. " We have received " how we ought to walk, as part of our Christian training; so we must " abound more and more " in our zeal to walk aright. We must abstain from all impurity and selfishness, for holiness is what is set before us by our vocation from God. In the *Gospel* (St. Matt. xv. 21–28) we have the example of the great faith of the woman of Canaan, which won healing for her daughter. In the same kind of faith, we appeal to God in the *Introit* to " call to remembrance his tender mercies ", and say " My God, in thee have I trusted, let me not be confounded "; and in the *Gradual*, in words from the same Psalm (Psalm 25), " Look upon my adversity and misery."

The Third Sunday

The *Epistle* for the third Sunday (Eph. v. 1–14) contains another of St. Paul's appeals for a moral life

worthy of Christians. We have been, he says, in the darkness of the world, but now we are " light in the Lord ". This is potentially true of all Christians, but they must " walk as children of light ", doing those things of which they will not be ashamed in the light of Christ. There are things that are not " convenient "; things, that is, not fitting for those who have " an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God ". This is indeed the purpose of Lent, to teach us to live according to our Christian calling.

The story of the casting out of a devil, and the accusation that our Lord could do such things " through the prince of the devils " supplies the *Gospel* (St. Luke xi. 14–28). The words of verses 21 and 22 (" When a strong man armed ") have the recollection of Isaiah liii. 12 behind them, and show how our Lord expected his victory through his suffering as the Servant of the Lord, of whom Isaiah in that chapter speaks.

The Fourth Sunday

The Fourth Sunday brings us to Mid-Lent. On it, the sombre purple vestments may be replaced by rose-coloured ones, and the altar decorated with flowers. This Sunday has been popular in England as " Mothering Sunday ", from an idea supplied by the Mass of the day. The *Introit* addresses Jerusalem as our mother, and bids us rejoice with her, and the *Epistle* (Gal. iv. 21–31) speaks of the " Jerusalem which is above ", the " mother of us all ". The other title of the day, Refreshment Sunday, is derived partly perhaps from the break of Mid-Lent, and partly from the account in the *Gospel* (St. John vi. 1–14) of the feeding of the five thousand.

The *Epistle* is not altogether easy for people nowadays to appreciate; we do not find it so easy to draw allegories from the existence of Abraham's two sons as St. Paul did. What St. Paul says, however, is of

permanent importance: the slave-son corresponds to the old covenant, the old dispensation that bound men in the code of a Law; the free son corresponds to the new covenant of our Saviour, in which we are free members of a free city. We must live as sons, not as slaves, of God, since Christ the eternal Son has purchased freedom for us.

Passion Sunday

On the fifth Sunday, Lent passes into Passion-tide. The solemnity of the season is marked by the veiling of crosses, statues, and pictures. The Church goes as it were into mourning on this day. The Psalm is omitted from the preparatory prayers of Mass, and the *Gloria* from the *Introit*, which is taken from the omitted Psalm (Psalm 43). The Passion is the theme of the *Epistle* (Hebrew ix. 11–15), in which the author speaks of our Lord as " the High Priest of good things to come "; unlike the old high priests, who offered the blood of animals, by the offering of his own life he has redeemed us. He is the Mediator of a new covenant, through which we may receive the promise of an eternal inheritance.

In the *Gospel* (St. John viii. 46–59) the opposition of the Jews, which was to lead to the Crucifixion, is described; it ended on this occasion with an attempt to stone our Lord, from which he escaped; but the shadow of the Cross was over him.

On the following Sunday (Palm Sunday) the Church passes into Holy Week, and the time for meditation on the last days of our Redeemer's life.

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